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C O N F I D E N T I A L MINSK 000957

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/01/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEC](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: PROTESTANTS THREATEN TO PROTEST FORCED SALE OF
CHURCH

REF: 05 MINSK 1167

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Dereck Hogan for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: On August 22, the GOB ruled that the New Life Church must sell their church building to the local government at a price far below market value and vacate the property by September 1, although no action has been taken by the authorities to date. Church leaders insist that the GOB's decision is not legal and promise to refuse to hand over the keys to the building. If the GOB threatens to remove the church members by force, they will vacate the premises and reassemble on Independence Square along with other Protestant groups to protest the violation of their religious freedoms. End summary.

GOB Forces Sale of Church at Below Market Value

12. (U) On August 22, the Minsk City Economic Court upheld its July 21 ruling forcing the New Life Church to sell the building it uses for worship. In 2002, the church purchased a cow barn on the outskirts of Minsk and turned it into a place of worship (reftel). Since the authorities claim the existence of a church is not in accordance with city development plans for this property, the GOB is forcing the church to sell the building to the city executive committee for USD 17,500. According to the church leaders, this price does not take into account the renovations and is 35 times lower than the actual value of the building. The GOB has until September 1 to transfer the money to the New Life Church, after which point the church community must vacate the premises.

Church Pastor: We Won't Take This Laying Down

13. (C) On August 25 New Life Church Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko and his lawyer Sergey Lukanin insisted to Poloff that the GOB's ruling was not legal. However, Lukanin believes that appealing is futile since it would not change the GOB's decision.

14. (C) Goncharenko said the 1,000-member New Life community plans to gather at the church building before the September 1 deadline and will only vacate the premises to avoid violence. If the GOB threatens to use force, the congregation would leave the building, but not give the keys to the authorities, and would reassemble on Independence Square to protest the forced removal. (Note: As of September 1, the authorities have not taken any action against the church members. End note.) Goncharenko noted the large support from fellow Christians and claimed there would be a large presence on the Square. Goncharenko told Poloff that the loss of their

building would not stop the Minsk New Life Church from worshiping. Although it would violate Belarusian law, church members would meet in small groups at members' homes.

Comment

15. (C) The year-long battle over the cow barn appears to have resulted in a GOB victory; it is unlikely that the local authorities would be swayed by a civic protest. However, if the New Life Church community and other Protestant groups follow through on their threat to protest, such action could mark the beginning of a more politically active Protestant community in Belarus.

Moore